Conditions for Success:
The Experience of the Tortillería Cooperative in Los Angeles, Michoacán, México

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Table of Contents

Introduction
- The Cooperative as an organizational form

Literature Review
- Defining success

Theoretical Perspective

Community Setting

Methodology

History of the Tortillería

Members of the Tortillería

Conditions that foster Internal Democracy
- Homogeneity
- Limits on membership
- Mutual and self-criticism
  - The Committee
  - An Informal Leader
- Dependence on internal support base
- Diffusion of knowledge and technology: work team rotation
- Provisional orientation

External Threats
- Resistance
- Autonomy

Further Analysis
- Organizational Culture
- Control and Ownership
- Leadership

Conclusions
Introduction
The cooperative work unit is important to study as a viable alternative to the predominantly
capitalist work system. As an organizational form, cooperatives have been demonstrated to
have moral, if not economic, significance (Carter 1990: 323). However, cooperatives are often
susceptible to failure. Because external factors affecting cooperatives are so variable, a study
of the internal organization of individual cooperatives would reveal more about how they might
achieve success.

Therefore, using ethnographic fieldwork, I will identify internal conditions that may explain why
the woman-run tortilleria cooperative in Los Angeles, Michoacán, Mexico has survived for over
twenty years. Examination of the internal dynamic, both from the members’ perspectives and in
the context of organizational theory, will lend insight into the cooperative’s success. While this
is a case study, I attempt to situate it within a greater body of work that analyzes the internal
characteristics that have been shown to foster success across cooperatives.

The cooperative as an organizational form
I will use Harper and Roy’s definition of a cooperative as “an autonomous association of
persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and
aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically controlled enterprise” (2000: 27). Within
the worldwide cooperative movement, the International Co-operative Association offers a
framework outlining six guiding principles which include open and voluntary membership,
democratic control by members, relative equality of share capital, return to members
proportionate to business done through the cooperative, collaboration with other cooperatives,
and the active practice of the values of democracy, equality, and voluntarism (Shah 1996: 31).
In general, these principles serve as a mere blueprint and are not intended as strict criteria by
which to qualify a cooperative.

However, imposition by government bodies or other “outside agents” and strict enforcement of
certain principles has threatened the realization of cooperative democracy (Shah 1996: 32-33).
Shah notes that it is precisely the freedom to select and adopt, but also to deviate from these
principles, that can allow a cooperative to sustain itself (1996). Given the value of self-
governance, in particular, cooperative conduct can vary significantly from one group to the next.
Further, the notion of success may take on multiple meanings given the differences in approach.

Literature Review

Defining Success
There is an inherent difficulty in assessing the success of cooperatives. Whereas the ultimate
goal of profit maximization governs the capitalist model, the cooperative structure is not dictated
by uniform directives. While cooperative organizations generally adhere to the overarching set
of principles mentioned above, there is no uniform goal. Therefore, the notion of success would
seem to be relative as it hinges on a set of organizational objectives, ideals, and goals specific
to each cooperative.

As cooperatives develop and manifest in a variety of forms, Rothschild and Whitt explain the
dilemma that defining success among the range of cooperative organizations presents:
“Collectivist enterprises assess themselves in terms of how well they are practicing their ideals,
the quality of the products or services they are providing, their ability to provide places of
employment, the satisfaction of their members, and-most ambiguous of all-their contribution to
larger societal changes” (1986: 145). Thus, in order to address the nuanced nature of
cooperatives, Rothschild and Whitt suggest that “alternative benchmarks” be used to assess success.

Of the alternative benchmarks that Rothschild and Whitt recommend, they cite the central one as “the creation and maintenance of organizational democracy” (Rothschild and Whitt 1986: 146-7). While they provide possible criteria from which to form an assessment of cooperative success, Rothschild and Whitt also address the individualized and dynamic nature of cooperatives that makes success difficult to qualify. As has been noted, success is variable from one cooperative to the next and may be measured by anything from the more abstract social benefits to tangible material gains. The nuanced character of cooperatives does not render them entirely inaccessible for analysis, however.

While Rothschild and Whitt suggest “alternative benchmarks,” Harper and Roy identify a list of factors that may be associated with success. Acknowledging that none of these factors are a necessary condition for success, they offer the results of their case studies as simply containing some lessons for future cooperatives (2000). They specifically consider the differing meanings of success given the results of their study of 20 or so cooperatives:

…participative self-management, member initiative and member loyalty may be regarded as ends rather than means. They certainly are important components of the process of empowerment … (but) If a group can help its members to earn rather more, or spend rather less, or feel a little more secure, that in itself is an achievement which goes far beyond the results of many of the more ambitious externally promoted co-operative promotion schemes” (2000: 120).

Thus, success may be conceived of in a way that addresses the more abstract personal rewards or sense of group fulfillment that cooperative participation can bring, rather than the ability to meet certain measures.

In Dorner’s study of group farming models, he argues that a generalized blueprint for cooperative success is inappropriate and unrealistic due to the variation in “preconditions, forms, and goals” (1977: 379). However, he acknowledges that valuable lessons can be extracted from the various cooperative experiences. While there is no precise formula of success that can be transposed from one cooperative onto another, more than just lessons can be extracted. Rothschild and Whitt contend that overarching internal factors and conditions can be identified that contribute to success.

Theoretical Perspective
An examination of basic organizational forms taken together with cooperative members’ insight will inform my research. I will use an organizational perspective to analyze the data, and will explain how this cooperative satisfies a number of the conditions that contribute to internal democracy, as identified by Rothschild and Whitt. By turning analysis from the organization towards the individual and collective level and allowing the women to speak for themselves, the meanings that the cooperative holds for its members are revealed (Rothschild and Whitt 1986). Thus, success will be defined not only by the cooperative’s ability to meet conditions that contribute to internal democracy, but also by how the women seem to conceive of it by the way that they define and meet their own goals.

Much of past cooperative research has analyzed success in the context of external social, historical, and political conditions. The recent trend in examining cooperatives has stressed the “internal structure, processes, and conditions of operation” as the foundation of analysis.
While the former influences are important to take into consideration, the latter allow pervasive forms to be identified.

Rather than searching for indicators that occur across a wide spectrum of cooperatives, previous research tended to provide idiosyncratic case studies which failed to treat cooperatives as significant organizational entities (Rothschild and Whitt 1986: 2). Instead of focusing on the characteristics of individual cooperatives, it is important to situate them within a greater context and to look at the consistent, overarching internal characteristics which occur across cooperatives such as leadership, task organization, control and participatory dynamics.

Despite each group’s unique development and approach, Rothschild and Whitt contend that there are pervasive organizational forms which can be examined for their effect on cooperative functioning. “Their (cooperative) development…has not been directed by some centralized leadership with clearly defined means, ends, and dogma… And, yet, because they are part of a movement, the basic organizational forms that have developed from place to place are virtually identical” (1986: 11).

Since the assertion over two decades ago by Rothschild and Whitt that our knowledge about the internal structure, processes, and conditions of operation for cooperatives was relatively unexplored territory, there has been a shift in the focus on cooperatives. In line with Rothschild and Whitt, Harper and Roy contend that previous cooperative and group enterprise research was too heavily focused on the group itself and on the role of external historical, social, political, and geographical factors instead of examining the internal organization of cooperatives. Similarly, they call for an examination of policy and management issues (2000: 5).

While Shah acknowledges the important role of social conditions in fostering and sustaining a cooperative, he cautions to avoid the pitfall of considering situations where extraordinary inputs, like exceptional leadership, exist as the basis for analysis. Despite the success generated by these inputs, they cannot be considered in the formulating ideas about how to improve the overall success rate in cooperative and collective action efforts. Rather, Shah advocates looking to “situations where large-scale co-operation has occurred and sustained itself over a period of time, and to analyze the internal dynamic of co-operation” (Shah 2006: 21).

Taking into account Shah’s disdain for examining isolated examples of remarkably successful co-operatives and declaring them as appropriate models of success, my aim is not to make recommendations for the application of the cooperative’s practices towards other cooperatives. Rather, I intend to detail the merits of a specific group that has proven itself a sustained cooperative endeavor and to identify the organizational forms may have contributed to their success.
Community Setting

The community of study was based upon my professor’s decision of a research locale for an anthropology field school that I participated in from January 9 to May 6, 2004. The study was conducted in the small, rural Mexican town of Los Angeles, population approximately 1,500, located in the state of Michoacán, Mexico. The town is situated roughly 10 miles between the larger towns of Los Reyes and Peribán, the municipality governing over the area. Myriad economic, social, and environmental changes are taking place in the community.

Heavily dependent on an agricultural livelihood, many of the male community members in Los Angeles are campesinos (farmers) with ejido (communally owned) land. While land tenure and ownership are legally vested in the community, the cropland is allocated by parcelas (plots). The change to the Mexican Constitution in 1992, allowing for the privatization of the once inalienable ejido parcel, has had vast economic implications (Brown 1997: 102). The ability to legally rent or sell land has resulted in the influx of foreign companies that have invested in luxury crops for export, including raspberries, blackberries, peaches, avocado, and agave. While some national cash crops are still delivered to local markets in neighboring towns, production is becoming more heavily focused on exportation to the United States and Canada and an economic dependency on foreign markets is being fostered.

The major crop grown in the area is sugar cane, though its viability is currently being threatened. In preparation for the creation of U.S. markets for Mexican sugar imports that NAFTA was supposed to deliver on, the Mexican government privatized mills and increased sugar production. However, due to limited access to the high-priced U.S. sugar market, the increase of Mexican imports of high fructose corn syrup from the U.S., the introduction of import permits allowing lower priced sugar to enter the domestic market, a crisis occurred in 2001-2002. Results included the sale of surplus sugar domestically at low prices and the expropriation of mills across Mexico (USDA 1994).

Privatization has also caused the closure of some mills, as private investors seek to consolidate and maximize profits. The closure of the nearby San Sebastián mill in 2002 has meant the loss of work for thousands of mill workers, cane growers, and workers in related jobs. Although the next closest Santa Clara mill provides alternative employment for some, the long driving distances required and the mill’s rigid schedule has caused many campesinos to look towards alternative crops. In addition to local labor shifts, community members in Los Angeles indicated that the decline of sugar production is causing out-migration.

As a result of economic changes, the social landscape is undergoing transition. The introduction of newer crops has opened up opportunities for women to work in the field, and in many cases women are replacing male laborers. Therefore, women are working outside of the

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1 Descriptions of the community and tortillería as are referenced in this section and in my methodology, as well as the history (pages 8-16), were conveyed to me in numerous formats—through a condensed written version drafted by one of the instrumental figures, a lengthy oral history dictated by a prominent founding member, in formal interviews, by way of casual conversation, and via targeted questions designed to gain a more thorough understanding. Therefore, the history I have compiled pieces together these varied interpretations and voices. While some of the historical details were documented on paper, the history as is written here is largely recounted by the women through the vessel of memory, both collective and individual. Details regarding dates, numbers, and the precise sequence of events were often lost on the women, leaving me with rough estimations and at times patchy chronological documentation. While interviews were conducted in Spanish, responses have since been translated into English.
home in greater numbers than ever before. This rapid change in women’s roles is generally being conveyed in a positive way, affording women economic independence and also the ability to contribute to the household income. However, the women expressed that wages are low and the work is arduous. Further, the unseen environmental consequences, given the exposure to various agricultural chemicals, may point to health effects in the long term.

**Methodology**

Before the mass transition to women working outside of the home, the women members of the tortillería cooperative in Los Angeles, Michoacán forged the way over 20 years ago. Given their longevity, the cooperative presented an interesting case study. I intend to examine cooperative success in terms of internal structure dynamics and member perspectives, though not to the exclusion of the community-specific setting. It will be important to examine what external factors have played a role in the cooperative’s functioning.

IRB permission for research was obtained for the purposes of the field school. In addition to data gained from cooperative members, I examined the Reglamento de la Ley Agraria para Formetar la Organización y Desarrollo de la Mujer Campesina, the bylaws of female groups organized under Mexican law, and the Ley General de Sociedades Cooperativas, Mexican legal guidelines for cooperatives. These provided an understanding of how Mexican cooperatives are mandated to function according to governmental regulations and of how much autonomy they are granted. Given the assertion that successful cooperatives have been allowed much decision-making power about how to manage their organization, it will be necessary to address the role of the government in this particular cooperative.

Over the course of three months, I undertook participant observation during all seven of the work days that form the weekly rotation, enhancing my understanding of the work team dynamics and the process by which they work. Further, it allowed me to juxtapose outsider observations of the women in their work environment and the women’s statements in formal interviews. During the participant observation periods, I documented, through photographic means, the tortilla production process and the women in action throughout the day of work. I attended one mandated monthly meeting and an impromptu meeting. Observing the interactions among the women during these meetings revealed methods of decision making and levels of participation.

I conducted formal interviews with cooperative members in their homes. While I did my best to schedule interviews following a shift I had worked with the women so as to increase comfortableness in my presence, this ideal interview timing could not always be arranged due to scheduling conflicts. There were 27 active cooperative members residing in Los Angeles, Michoacán at the time and 2 other members who were unavailable and out of the working rotation, but who still received membership benefits.

The interview includes questions regarding group interaction, the division of work, decision making methods, problem solving techniques, historical changes, role in community, personal significance, autonomy as a group, and conceptualization of what a cooperative is (see Appendix A). I also conducted a focus group with five women to facilitate discussion on the future of the tortillería. Casual conversations with women of the family with whom I was living were important in gaining a greater understanding of the tortillería in both present times and in a historical context. Three of the family members have been heavily involved with the tortillería since its inception and had valuable information to share.
However, living with and being intimately associated with the most influential members of the cooperative could have put me at a significant disadvantage in soliciting the genuine feelings and opinions of the other members. Although I assured the women interviewed that the information would not be shared with other group members, they may have been hesitant to express negative opinions about inequalities of power and control within the group, taking my relation with the host family into consideration.

I conducted a qualitative analysis of interview data in search of general themes. While a collective voice tends to emerge, there are differences to address. In locating the group historically, I hope to provide some additional insight into their current status.

**History of the Tortillería**

Unlike many cooperatives that have been established in developing nations in an effort to achieve economic and social stability, the creation of the cooperative tortillería was not inspired by a state-sponsored rural development scheme (Rose 1981: 223-4). Rather, it arose out of local initiative and was based on the needs of the community. Given that no other formal tortillería endeavor existed in the town at the time, the women were able to occupy a market niche and avoid competing forces.

There does not seem to have initially been an ideological commitment to the cooperative format and, even still, most members are unaware of the basic cooperative principles. The women came together in order to work and earn a little money, and that they organized in a cooperative format was a practical endeavor. In addition to economic ambitions, the women were eager to provide a service to the community.

Shah’s research rests on the premise that “cooperation does not just happen, at least not as often as opportunities for it seem to arise; it has to be catalyzed, orchestrated, and made to work” (Shah 1996: 25). The history of the tortillería attests to this fact and demonstrates the ongoing process that has allowed the cooperative to develop into its current form. Member insight also reveals how this cooperative was a grass-roots effort.

The initial stirrings of a group enterprise began in 1980, led by Elena at the suggestion of her husband. Due to the stipulation in Mexican land reform law that designates within each ejido an available plot for ejidatarias, the female beneficiaries of land reform, obtaining their own piece of land for the purpose of a cooperative could be a reality.

In order to obtain the parcela, the women were mandated to organize in a cooperative format. Elena’s husband recommended that the women procure the parcela that was formerly owned by Elena’s deceased uncle but had become a collectively owned piece of land belonging to the ejido. Although the women of the ejido Gildardo Magaña in Los Angeles, Michoacán were entitled to their own piece of the ejido land, they met with opposition from the then-appointed consejo de administración (commissioner) and shareholder, who presided over the care of the land following the death of her uncle.

In addition to the comisariado ejidal, the elected chief ejido commissioner, two other prominent male community members expressed disapproval because they were women. Due to this opposition, the women were forced to consult higher level official outlets to garner support and permission. Two or three trips were made on this behalf. The women traveled a considerable distance to Morelia, the capital of Michoacán, to speak with the delegation of the Confederación

2 The names of the women have been changed in order to protect their identities.
Nacional de Campesinos (CNC), or the National Federation of Farmers, about obtaining the land. As a result of this visit, a formal document was drafted from an official of Unidades Agrícolas, the organization presiding over agricultural units, within the CNC. Despite presentation of the document to the Comisariado Ejidal, the land request was denied.

The women were relentless in their pursuit, bothering the officials. Faced with an upcoming election of the Comisariado Ejidal, the women had Elena’s uncle on their side, who promised the women the land if he were to get elected. Thus, it was with the appointment of the new commissioner, in 1981, that the wives and daughters of shareholders were recipients of the rightful and awaited handover of the plot of land.

A census was administered to establish which women would be allowed to take part in the group. Membership was restricted to only the daughters and wives of ejiditarios, who gathered for a convocatorio (meeting). Around 90 women were part of the original group and proceeded to form an administrative committee and a vigilance committee. Within the administrative committee, women were appointed to positions of President, Secretary, and Treasurer. Elena was the organizer of the group and its first President. Her daughter, Graciela, emerged as a dynamic leader, and will be discussed at length in this paper.

The parcela contained 8 hectares (a hectare is equivalent to 2.47 acres) of pure cane. In the beginning there were 35 or 36 women who worked the land with machetes, yet they weren’t educated in farming and fertilization practices. It took them one or two years to learn how to work the land, including planting, cutting, and applying fertilizer. Even after this rough start-up period the results were unsatisfactory. The work was physically demanding and with young children to care for at home, the women decided to hire sharecroppers to work the land after the first three years.

From the profits of the initial harvest, the women earned 70,000 pesos. With the first earnings, the women began to construct a building in which to run a tortillería, a much needed institution in the area. In 1982 they bought tortillería equipment from a neighboring village. Though they bought the machines with credit, everything is now paid off.

Operation of the tortillería commenced in 1982 and was undertaken by wage-earning employees outside of the group who were supervised by the existing committee. After some time working with these people, problems arose with the machine operator, whom they finally took to court. After resolving these problems the group reorganized with the assistance of people from the political party Partido Socialista Unificado Mexicano (PSUM), now the PRD, who showed them how to formulate teams according to a daily rotation scheme. Work teams were formed through random selection from a list.

During this period of reorganization, many women left or were forced out of the group who were, as one member said, “oppressed by their husbands’ chauvinism.” The new phenomenon of women working outside of the home was not accepted by some men in the community. In addition to the restriction imposed by many husbands, women left for reasons including lack of tools, disorganization, the laborious nature of the work, and the difficulty in working outside of their homes. Many women were pulled toward family obligations.

When they bought the equipment for the tortillería, the women had to take turns going to work at 4 am to make the nixtamal (the corn in its cooked form) and prepare the tortillas. Initially firewood, rather than gas, was used to cook the dough, requiring the women to collect wood and carry it long distances. They also had to walk with the masa, the cornmeal dough used to make tortillas.
Characterization of the initial phase of the cooperative often centers upon the “miles de sacrificios” or, thousands of sacrifices, necessary to formulate the group and to get things up and running. One of the women noted that it was like a game in the beginning. The women had no experience or knowledge, nor a model to follow. They were starting anew on many fronts, the majority of them working outside of the home for the first time and also learning new skills. Initially, they didn’t keep track of their expenses. For the first 5 years they had no earnings and after that they were still minimal. As the cooperative started making money, some women were enticed to come back.

As was narrated to me by one of the key historical figures, the women became increasingly organized over time and worked better every day, taking care of the land and the tortillería, improving their equipment, expanding their building to include the store and the “bodega” (garage area), and increasing their profits. They also expanded the farm and bought a minibus for passengers which they were able to pay back little by little. The closing of the mill in 2002 removed access to credit for buying fertilizers and other necessities and the transportation costs to deliver cane to the mill in Santa Clara were costly. Therefore, rising costs meant that the land was no longer profitable and the women decided to rent out the parcela. They operated the minibus from 1989 to 1996, which they have since sold. However, they still own a combi which they use internally. As the years passed, “they grew to be one of the most integrated and well-known women cooperatives in the state,” a prominent member declared. Another member noted, they have proved themselves economically and the struggle has been worth it.

Members of the Tortillería
In order to assure that multiple ideologies for participation are accounted for, it is important that the individual tortillería members are given a voice (Nelson and Wright, 1995). Through interviews, I sought to capture the perspectives of various women regarding their motivations for joining the group, reasons for continued participation, and the nature of group dynamics. Below I have represented the perspectives of four women, some of which are representative of the general group consensus and others which are unique.

Rosa
Rosa is a 56 year old widow with four children. Only her youngest child lived with her at the time of the interview. Rosa did not represent a typical member of the tortillería in terms of her financial position and the degree of her reliance upon the annual dividend. Judging by the nature of her home, one room constructed of rudimentary materials, as well as the existence of her second job, she appeared to be one of the most financially disadvantaged among the women. Aside from the tortillería, she worked five days a week in the fields. She was already widowed before the formation of the tortillería and says that she has had to work hard over the years to support her four children. Her youngest child is now eighteen years old, but Rosa is committed to working for as long as she is physically able, not only because of the pleasure it brings to her life, but also because of the money.

While Rosa acknowledged some minor tensions within the group resulting from power differentials, she felt that conflict did not threaten the overall functioning. She recognized the necessity of a body that is able to steer the group and held Graciela in high esteem for her knowledge and ability to lead. She noted, “Some women shout because they tell the committee not to order us around anymore, but the committee has to orient the group. Graciela knows better, and knows more than the other women. She explains things as they are.”
Rosa noted that their relations are generally good that and their connection as friends and fellow workers is strong enough to overcome minor bickering. “It has been so many years like this. We are friends and group members and there is little fighting.”

**Amalia**
Amalia is a 50 year old widow with three children. She had proven to be one of the more boisterous, vocal members of the group during one of the meetings I attended, but was surprisingly calm during the interview.

She spoke of the tortillería’s financial and social benefits. She noted, “It (the tortillería) helps us a lot. Sometimes we don’t have money. The tortillería loans us money and this is good for us.” Amalia has worked the same day since the beginning and so has another member and friend on the same team. “We pass the day happy, talking with our friends,” she said. They have worked together for 22 years and have taken the time to sing, laugh, and cry together.

Of heated discussions, Amalia said, “When there are discussions like this it seems like there is no unity, like we are divided.” However, she distinguished between the work that is done in the tortillería and what happens during the meetings, calling the meetings “another story.” Outside of the meetings, the women are friends. They have had all sorts of arguments, and have fixed the problems from within. Generally, there are not large problems and the smaller issues, the “problemitas,” are with the work or the equipment and they have tried to improve the quality of products that they sell at the tortillería. Amalia concluded that generally the women work well together and are united.

**Ana**
Ana is a 58 year old widow with 6 children. She is composed and deliberate in how she speaks and gave a thorough interview, with careful, detailed responses to all of the questions asked.

As she is a widow, Ana commented that the money helps a little. Ana works as a seamstress apart from her work in the tortillería. She also mentioned that she sells chickens, but did not offer any more details about this.

While Ana mentioned that there have been some internal issues with member relations, she focused more on the technical problems. She noted that the women used to break into cliques and not talk to one another. Now there are only a few women like this, but, as she says, they put their differences aside to work. Ana commented that “each woman has her opinions and her ways.” Technical obstacles, including the malfunction or complete breakdown of the machines have made work difficult, and while problematic for the women, these issues also annoy community members.

**Norasilda**
Norasilda is 65 years old and the mother of 9 living children. Many of her children have graduated from university and are professionals in the state’s capital, a fact of which she is quite proud. Though Norasilda has generally led a happy life, she said that it has been hard for her husband who was sometimes only able to provide the children with little, through never leaving the children hungry. She and her husband have run a store for 8 years, where their specialty is the sale of chickens. Norasilda tends to the store all day long and is one of few women in the group who has a full-fledged business outside of the work at the tortillería.
Although Norasilda has never been part of the committee, she said that she makes her point in group meetings. She considers a few in charge and the rest as workers, though she did not speak of this as a negative aspect of the group.

Her husband, who also sat in on the interview, mentioned that Norasilda dresses up before going to the tortillería. She enjoys being part of the group and meets some of her coworkers for lunch in the afternoon. She noted, “You’re not going to believe me, but it is a tranquil day. It passes by without notice…It is not work, it is a distraction.”

**Conditions that foster internal democracy**

The conditions I refer to have been identified by Rothschild and Whitt and include homogeneity, limits to membership, mutual and self-criticism, dependence on internal support base, diffusion of knowledge, and provisional orientation. While the authors name two other internal conditions, these are not applicable in the case of the tortillería and I have omitted them from my analysis. The discussion of internal threats that follows are not those identified by Rothschild and Whitt.

**Homogeneity**

The tortillería satisfies the conditions that comprise a strong organizational culture, as identified by numerous authors and compiled by Oliver and Thomas (1990). The women are bound together by shared goals and purpose, which the majority of women expressed as the desire to work and earn money. “We have been dedicated to the work. Another member reflected their cohesiveness: “We are all interested. We all have the desire to work. We all work together and that is how it has survived for so long.”

There is an understanding that the tortillería is dedicated to the promotion of community welfare. The interests of the women ultimately lie more with the service they deliver than with the profit they make. As there were no jobs for women in the community before the formation of the tortillería, its establishment represented a breakthrough by providing women an opportunity to work outside of the home for the first time. In becoming members, the women have undergone a personal and collective transformation together. Therefore, the tortillería has served as a “means of expressing and formalizing their sense of shared interests and shared identity” (Rose, Sherman, Young 1981: 217). Part of this identity involves the multiple roles that the women have taken on as mothers, housekeepers, and workers.

Most of the women are between 50 and 70 years old. Two women in their 30s are standing in on behalf of their mothers and are relatively new to the group. The group has maintained a fairly consistent membership base, with the first death of a member in the summer of 2003. The members of the tortillería visited the cemetery and sung her to the grave. Given the cohesiveness of the group, this was a difficult time and remains a painful memory. The cooperative is associated with being a social outlet where many friendships have been cultivated. The women express great trust and confidence in each other.

Shared goals and identity have translated into a sense of pride. The tortillería is a source for what Rose, Sherman, and Young refer to as “solidary” incentives in that it serves to improve the women’s social image and raise their status, in their own eyes as well in the eyes of the rest of society (1981: 19). Apart from their daily work at the tortillería, there is a strong social component to their group. The women hold exclusive events open only to members. During a “posada” on December 25, they have party with a gift exchange and distribution of the year-end earnings. On Mother’s Day, the women lock themselves into the bodega, apart from their families, and carouse with beer, tequila, music, and food. These events build and affirm group
solidarity. One woman expressed, “We don’t know how many years more we have together. It’s beautiful to live as a group.”

Indeed, the women have undergone personal transformations over the course of the years. One woman noted that, “They express themselves better in the community. The meetings help them to learn conversational skills. People come to visit and talk with the women while they are working.” The women have also become more self-reliant, gaining a sense of independence from their husbands. It was noted that “women don’t have to follow the orders of men anymore.” The year-end dividend has also allowed the women a sense of financial independence. One member mentioned that she likes the fact that she makes her own money and that she doesn’t have to wait to be handed money from her husband.

Although the women repeatedly refer to the year-end dividend with terms such as “dinerito,” “centavito,” and “chequecito,” implying that the amount is relatively small, the money remains a primary reason cited for initial entrance and for continued membership in the group. “We earn a little, but it’s something or nothing.” Few women expressed that the money was critical, though some did indicate that it is a significant contribution to household income. Although the women are growing old and complain about body aches, many are reluctant to give up their work at the tortillería because the year-end dividend is a desired source of income. Therefore, the money is a small incentive for continued participation.

A minimum level of incentives exists, yet these serve as a motivating factor and keep members involved. One key problem identified with the dysfunction of cooperatives is lack of incentives. Within cooperative theory, a barrier to maintaining the cooperative is the free rider phenomenon. This “free rider” issue is framed as the tendency for members to shirk extra responsibility or costs “where the benefits of such action would accrue to everyone (Olson, 1971)” (Rothschild and Whitt 1986: 112). They follow this by noting that due to the egalitarian design of a cooperative, extra work does not materialize in extra rewards, reducing worker incentive (1986: 112). However, the women have identified free riding as a minor disturbance and only a few cases of women displaying this behavior were cited. The accountability built into the tortillería’s structure and the type of control at work may attribute to the low level of free riding.

Some of the tangible incentives for members include the distribution of money at the end of the year, the right to interest-free loans if necessary, coverage of funeral expenses and medical bills, and access to the cooperative’s minibus. Despite the allure of these incentives, they are a peripheral motivating factor, while the desire to work, earn a little money, and serve the community are primary factors.

Although attendance at regularly scheduled monthly meetings is mandatory, some women don’t attend for various reasons. At a given meeting, there are women who don’t have permission from their husbands, others forget, and some are sick. As a consequence for not attending, the women are prohibited from working the following week and are obligated to pay a fine of 20 pesos. A member noted, “It’s good that there’s a fine because this keeps the women interested in the group.” Another woman commented, “Everyone has the same right to the money, but the amount received depends on the amount of work put in.” Thus, because members can see the direct results of their own efforts, individual initiative remains strong. Expulsion from the group is always possible if a woman does not follow the rules, though this is not a problem with the current group.

Despite the incentives in place, member behavior does not seem to be shaped by the prospect of threats or rewards, but more by what Etzioni refers to as normative control, or appeal to a shared set of values or implicit rules of concerning what is ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ behavior (Oliver and
There does seem to be an underlying sense of altruism, motivating each worker to fulfill in their appropriate role in order to benefit the whole. However, if, as a group, the women fail to follow the rules and the cooperative does not function properly, they will lose the parcela. Thus, outside mandates have some influence in controlling behavior.

**Limits on membership**

Deviating from one of the basic cooperatives principles citing open membership, the tortillería’s stance restricting membership has resulted in a tight-knit familial form. Membership is currently at 29, of whom 27 are currently working. Indeed, the group’s rule regarding closed membership seems to be a crucial factor in their continued existence, fostering a sense of community and facilitating the creation of long-lasting friendships. Further, it has served to maintain a distinct group culture.

The women use selective recruitment when allowing new members into the group. If a member leaves, it is preferred that her daughter serves in her place, though another female family member may be permitted instead. Despite the emphasis on lineage, the group has the power to deny someone entrance based on whatever grounds they choose. For example, one of the women has mentioned the possibility of her daughters entering in her place, but the members dislike these women and will not allow them to enter.

Cooperative members report that women in the community are jealous because they want to join but are restricted from becoming members. Aside from the tortillería, a chicken fattening business has existed for quite some time, and there is a sewing business in the process of starting up.

**Mutual and self-criticism**

“Todos somos dueñas” or “we are all bosses” was repeated in interview after interview, indicating that there is a sense that everyone shares in the same advantages and are on a level playing field. The affirmative belief that “we all have a voice and a vote” is representative of how many of the members’ view the democratic decision-making process that is one of the hallmarks of the cooperative tradition. It is not simply a mantra espoused by the women; it is mandated in the Reglamento that this be the case. The overall trust and solidarity necessary for cooperation and democratic decision making is evident in this group.

However, the nature of participatory dynamics is framed in different ways. One woman noted that some members exercise their voices more than others, leading to feelings of intimidation and inequality. Another indicated that sometimes members are louder than others and the quiet women are often afraid and don’t offer their input. The fact that there are women who verbally dominate the meetings is affirmed in many interviews. Though, one member noted, “Some talk more, but this does not mean that they have more influence.” And, it was also commented that “women stand up to the committee more now.”

Disagreements are conceived of as minor disturbances and are not viewed as significant disruptions to the effective functioning of the group. As one woman stated, “Everyone has different opinions and sometimes they don’t agree, but it is not a major thing and we continue on. Some of the women talk, but I don’t. Before only Graciela would talk, but now others speak up.” This was reaffirmed by another member’s statement: “The majority of the time the women get along, but there are always discussions and times when we don’t get along. We talk

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3 I have included a fictitious name for “Graciela” because her role is critical and will be discussed at length in this paper.
and resolve the issues.” “We have lasted for some 22 years. We don’t think the same. There are 29 different opinions. This is neither good, nor bad.”

Even though the fact that they are all dueñas was generally conveyed as a positive thing, some women think it problematic that no one is truly in charge. As one woman stated, “We are all owners but nobody controls us.” One woman noted that the lack of anyone in charge makes it difficult to enact punishments.

The Committee
The basic structure of the committee consists of the consejo de administración with a president, secretary, and treasurer and the consejo de vigilancia, with a president, secretary, and vocal. For each of the six positions, there is someone designated as a substitute. Elections are held every three years to vote in a new committee.

Some women expressed comfort with deference to the president and committee. One member spoke of advising the president because, “We are workers...we don’t know.” Similarly, another woman respects the current administration because, as she says, they know what they are doing and are educated. She thinks it better to have women who know how things work and states, “Are they going to put in a donkey like me?” Another woman spoke of her unfamiliarity with the issues and her inability to represent a group. Thus, personal and even general group competence is brought into question while faith in the ability to lead the group is vested in a select few who are considered suitable for the job.

This division between the committee and the other members is not necessarily framed as a negative one, then. Some believe that this is a necessary and constructive relationship. Imposing that control rests with the committee, one member noted, “Graciela and others give orders, but this is good.” Thus, committee members are in their respective positions for reasons of their knowledge and competency. “The committee is more active, but I believe that we’re equal.”

There are power differentials as access to documents and rules are restricted, with most of the women unfamiliar with the Reglamento many with only basic reading skills. Many of the women did not graduate from primary school and some members have to sign on behalf of others who cannot read or write. Therefore, a sense of incompetence may not stem from an actually inability to lead but, rather, a lack of self esteem related to lack of literacy and other practical skills.

Beliefs regarding the greater competence of those in charge are bound to have considerable affects on group power dynamics. Cooperatives are faced with managing the tension between the necessary presence of guidance and leadership and the equal participation of members in decision-making (Dorner 1977: 379). Indeed, there are feelings of resentment towards the committee. “The committee thinks that no one can do the jobs like they do. The current committee should teach the new committee. Instead of complaining, they should teach a new group how to lead.” Other women conceive of this resentment as a form of envy. “There is a lot of envy of the women in charge. There is no trust among the compañeras…we don’t stay united.”

Members acknowledge that being part of the committee is a lot of responsibility. The committee is thought of as being flexible and able to move along quickly, with husbands that let them leave on short notice to go to meet with the authorities if necessary. They also have the ability to speak in front of groups. Others do not have the facility to do this.
An Informal Leader

Graciela satisfies the position of the charismatic leader that cooperative research and organizational theory often addresses. It is clear that when the women speak of the committee, they are not necessarily referring to the current committee. Rather, they tend to speak of Graciela's role as informal leader throughout the history of the cooperative; she is inextricably linked to what the committee does and what it represents. This is supported by the statement by a member: "Even with the change in committee, Graciela stays in charge." Her commitment to the group is evident: "Graciela helps the others because she has the most education. She works the most. Even if she is not on the committee, she always helps out." From the meetings I witnessed, Graciela took on a prominent leadership role in setting the agenda and directing the conversation.

Comments made by many women of the cooperative reflect the belief that because Graciela is formally educated, she has a greater body of knowledge than the other women in the group, qualifying her to be in a position of leadership. Her knowledge is coveted and held in high esteem, as it is a rare occurrence that a member of the community has received a formal education beyond high school, much less a female. Graciela attended technical school and has worked at the secondary school as a secretary for the last 25 years, handling all of the accounts.

However, faith in Graciela's abilities does not simply stem from the perceived prestige that comes with having an educational background; she has a proven track record throughout the years of directive, hands-on leadership. The consensus is clear that Graciela has rightly earned the respect and acclaim that is bestowed upon her, and her merit is substantiated by many. Members indicated that they consult Graciela with their problems and that she always leads the problem resolution. "Graciela tells the truth, gives her opinion, and is on top of things. One reason that people don't like Graciela is because she tells the truth." While Graciela's ability to lead was rarely questioned, occasionally members criticized how her leadership is exercised. One member, who is Graciela's aunt, commented that she was cautious to agree with her niece in meetings because other members would be critical. However, overall comments from the group speak to Graciela's positive, influential role.

The women have been united for 23 years and Graciela says that she has had a "major part of the leadership." She attributed this to her skill in keeping the accounts and her ability to solve problems. Graciela said that she is always thinking of the group, how to better it, and how the women can be more united. Having more responsibilities than others, her specific duties include taking attendance, taking minutes, and distributing the profits. Graciela serves many different roles including leader, mediator, and counselor. She considers her actions on behalf of the tortillería as a job, and she approaches her responsibilities with seriousness and a desire for accuracy. In contributing to the betterment of the community through her work at the school and the cooperative, Graciela embodies the ideals of service.

Dependence on internal support base

While the tortillería provides an essential service for the town, the townspeople offer both the necessary financial and moral support for their continued operation. One of the members noted, "It is a service to the town. The tortillería is a benefit for everyone." A majority of community members consume their product and have become dependent on this institution to provide the dietary staple that is the tortilla. Few people still make tortillas in their own homes. Indeed, the tortillería is a central institution in the community of Los Angeles, fully integrated into
the routine of daily life. While towns of larger sizes have multiple tortillerías, the cooperative is the sole provider in the community.

The closing of the sugar cane mill has not affected their sales or customer base; it was noted that much like beer and Coke, the demand for tortillas will always remain the same. “Sometimes the tortillas are not good—they are too yellow. But the people always eat them.” Community members sometimes note that they are not cooked enough, or that the masa is not mixed well. While members maintain that the tortillería produces a warm, fresh product and they use clean processes, they say that the tortillas sold in the stores are cold, dirty, and more expensive. They are proud to contend that their tortillas are of superior quality.

Upon the introduction of tortillas from tortillerías in Los Reyes two and a half years ago, Graciela spoke with the authorities about the effect that this competition would have on the community, but they did not understand and were unresponsive. Although sales dropped some when a couple of storeowners began selling packaged tortillas from neighboring towns, the tortillería has not suffered a great financial blow. Some townspeople choose not to patronize the tortillería because they are jealous and others do not like to wait in line. November brings lower sales because many women harvest maíz (corn) at this time. However, December is a time for many weddings and holiday celebrations and high sales balance out with the lower sales from the previous month.

The cooperative satisfies Shah’s high centrality characterization, meaning that it is central to members’ livelihoods. He concludes that if members “do not regard it as critical to their own well-being they will be unlikely to be very concerned with its operations or management, and their neglect may be expected to lead to its eventual failure” (1996: 134-5). While the tortillería has been a source of great pride and has played a pivotal role in the lives of the members, it has also become central to the livelihoods of the townspeople.

The relationship with and patronage by community members encourages continued participation among the women, making for a mutually reinforcing and beneficial relationship. Both sides recognize the value that the tortillería has for the community. A member noted that “everyone helps us with all that we do.” The work is conceived as a duty and commitment, a “compromiso” to the community. The women also have a social service orientation—they allow small loans to the poor for tortilla purchases, and they offer free tortillas to a mentally ill community member.

By contributing their time and money to community social events, the women fill a social role as well. They have assisted monetarily and otherwise with church benches, windows, the steeple, and painting, and also with planting of flowers in front of the school. The women also donate money towards food and music for the fiestas patrias that begin annually on August 2.

**Diffusion of knowledge and technology: work team rotation**

A rotation has been devised so that the work is divided equally among daily groups. With the exception of the Saturday team that has three workers, teams consist of four members. On each team’s assigned day of the week, three workers perform while the fourth rests. The Saturday team also maintains the work-rest rotation among the three workers. The member who fills in for the given resting Saturday group member substitutes her regular work team day for the Saturday assignment. Thus, there is a constant rotation of workers on the Saturday team. These rotations ensure that all women work the same number of hours each month and that everyone receives equal pay.
The exception to this equal pay scheme occurs if one of the three women on a given team decides not to work a shift, leaving the remaining two to split the daily allocation of money that factors into the year-end dividend. If the absentee woman wants to, she can find a substitute. To maintain equality, a woman who acts as a substitute forfeits her regular assigned day of work so as to not make double the pay as the others.

Each team works a bit differently, although on a given day, the same tasks need to be completed. Morning preparation includes cleaning the inside and outside areas, starting the fires to prepare the nixtimal for the next day’s group, and agitating the raw corn for the next batch of nixtimal against a mesh wire screen in order to slough off any unwanted pieces. The corn is rinsed and then transferred to large pots where it will cook. Prepared nixtimal from the previous day is funneled into the molineria de nixtimal in order to create a mashed corn product. This product is then mixed with corn flour and lime and put into the polvedora, the machine that mixes the ingredients with a rotating metal arm to create a dough. This dough is then transferred into a funnel atop the tortilla making machine, and producing a tortilla. Other tasks include collecting the tortillas as they come down the conveyor belt, stacking and weighing tortillas, and collecting money.

Some women like to rotate roles, while others prefer to work at certain machines for the day. Each group has worked out their flow and the process by which they work, though a given team’s thoroughness seems to slightly vary. The women on a given team generally seem to do an equal amount of work.

For trial purposes, the store owner and machine operator once kept a daily checklist to track how well the women worked during the day at the various tasks. They have explored the idea of putting a group on probation for a week if they are not working well. In their place another group would work and receive the pay for the day. At the time of research, they had not yet implemented any formal system. However, one group was openly admonished at the monthly meeting because their dough was not turning out well and since then they have reportedly been working harder. Graciela also mentioned distributing a reward for the group that works the best.

When members leave for vacation, for a year in the United States, or for whatever the circumstance might be, they do not receive pay. If women are deemed incapable to work due to the birth of a baby, an operation, or a sickness, they are granted 3 months of half-pay but after this period, they don’t receive pay. Currently three of the women are on leave. It is doubtful the woman who has left for the United States will return, but after years of hard work, her place will still be waiting if she ever decides to come back. The women remain bound as a group and dedicated to one another.

The women earn 100 pesos for each day worked. The cooperative fund is divided among the year-end dividends, supplies and maintenance, and a social fund, with which the women have purchased the combis, trampolines, and contributed money to fiestas.

There are a few sources of tension surrounding the division of labor. One member runs the adjoining store, owned by the cooperative, that sells staple items and some snacks. This woman receives half of the store profits, the amount of which she is reluctant to share with the group, and the rest of the profits are split among the group. However, Graciela has contended that having one person in charge of the store helps the cooperative run smoothly and reduces the possibility of confusion and the risk of thievery.
Additionally, there is one woman who works daily and knows how to operate the tortilla producing machine. While some women contend that she does not want to share information about the machine, it was also noted that members do not have the desire to learn and that they consider the machine dangerous. It is clear that she has a lot of responsibility. She assembles the machine in the morning and disassembles and greases it at night. Not only is the smooth operation of the machine under her responsibility, but she also weighs and distributes the tortillas every day. Unlike the other members, she does not have time to make small talk with the customers. This same woman is pensioned, and she receives a monthly salary that comes out of the general fund. She believes that in addition to the pension, she should receive the yearly dividend, but the other women disagree.

One woman has brought up the fact that younger women who enter the group in place of older women receive the same dividend, even though they have not toiled throughout the years. This was seen as being unjust because the younger women have not suffered.

Given these contentions, none of them seem to constitute major threatening factors in the effective functioning of the tortillería, as only one or two of the women mentioned these problems and even at this, disregarded their significance, but rather stated them as minor bothers. However, it is certainly the case that a monopoly on knowledge, as in the instance of the machine operator, leads to power differentials and inequality.

**Provisional orientation**

The cooperative’s overall flexible nature with adherence to the main cooperative principles helped is sustain. The group has demonstrated that organizational ebb and flow is critical in the longevity of a cooperative. Graciela noted that she is continually thinking about ways to modify and improve the cooperative. Though the tortillería started out simply, with a single task orientation, they have expanded with time into other endeavors. The tortillería remains the central effort, however. They have proven to be entrepreneurial, with the purchasing of the combi and the recent introduction of the trampoline, which children in the community can pay to use.

The future of the tortillería is uncertain, but ideas on how to deal with anticipated changes have been proposed. Although the women are growing old and sick, they don’t want to lose their year-end dividend. Currently, if a woman is no longer able to work, she does not receive money. Graciela has proposed a way to provide continued security for the women, offering the idea that members could stop working but still receive half of what the regular workers receive for the year-end dividend. However, this idea was not received well by the women who would continue working.

Now that the cooperative is so established, they can look to diversifying their operation. Indeed, the idea of a bread making business has been discussed as an additional source of income.

**External Threats**

**Resistance**

Although the general community sentiment towards the cooperative is supportive, the members refer to ill feelings harbored by some of the other women in town. Envy is attributed to the cooperative’s membership exclusivity. Members claim that other women desire to have their own business and are jealous that they didn’t have the idea. It is believed that some want to start another tortillería, even though there wouldn’t be enough support to sustain another cooperative.
As the women have established their own domain and run a successful operation, they are seen as a threat by some of the men. One member attributed these sore feelings to pure envy because the women have the means to organize, their own money, the ability to take trips, and can get drunk (this was said jokingly). The women claim that "The men criticize us. The combi is competition for the men combi and taxi drivers. They are envious." They note that people like to categorize the women and that some men have negatively referred the women as "viejas" (old women), "campesinas" (farmers), and "freseras," speaking of the women who work in the fields picking strawberries. Some men believe that women should not be working outside of the home. The various criticisms do not pose a large threat to the women, who are able to dismiss them.

**Autonomy**

While abuse of control from within the cooperative structure can be a problem, outside forces can also pose a threat to autonomy. Although the idea of the cooperative originated locally, it was organized according to the guidelines of the Ley General de Sociedades Cooperativas, which mandates that the women have a central executive committee and follow the principle of one woman, one vote (Cámara de Diputados 2007).

The group stresses their officialness at the national level, as they are approved by the Reforma Agraria, who are only consulted concerning major problems. Rose, Sherman, and Young note that it is common that local level intervention of governmental administrative bodies with regards to cooperatives occurs primarily in response to crisis situations (1981: 216). With the changing of the committee every three years, officials come to oversee the process. Otherwise, the women resolve problems among themselves.

Rather than feel constrained by the organizing body, the women view the Unidad Agrícola as a source of help and advice. One member noted, "We have help from people who are more competent than we are." In the beginning, a few women went to consult Unidad Agricola and they were not acknowledged, but the next time all of the women went and they were attended to. Thus, through experience the women have learned how to work within the system.

**Further Analysis**

**Organizational Culture**

According to Oliver and Thomas, a number of writers, following Peters and Waterman, have documented the "conditions which create and sustain a ‘strong’ culture” that include “a shared set of over-arching goals, a sense of mission,” “minimal internal divisions,” “selective recruitment and intensive socialization of new members”, and "structures and systems which make individual behavior public" (1990: 343). The ability to meet these conditions, similar to those identified by Rothschild and Whitt, contributes to internal democracy from an organizational theory perspective. However, even though the tortillería satisfies these conditions, it is important to look closer at the implications of control and its relationship to ownership in a cooperative setting.

**Control and Ownership**

Control, as a way eliciting appropriate behavior, need not have negative implications. The tortillería demonstrates what Etzioni calls normative, moral, or cultural control, meaning that members pay heed to organizational demands “on the grounds that compliance is the ‘right’ response” (Oliver and Thomas 1990: 343). While the women are motivated to work by
incentives, they are moved to appropriate action overwhelmingly due to their commitment to the group, and overt conflict is little.

According to Shah, control of individuals is central to all purposeful collective action. He notes that:

“The issue of control reveals more ambiguities for co-operatives than perhaps any other. Being a member of a co-operative is often described in terms of ‘individual freedom,’ ‘an absence of bosses’, and so on. Membership of an organization typically entails an exchange—the benefits of membership are exchanged for contributions to the organization. Inevitably individuals are constrained by organizational directives to some degree. (1996: 135)

However, the misuse of control can often betray the supposed egalitarian nature of cooperative functioning and threaten participatory democracy, a core value of cooperative organization. Bayat notes that while management is accountable to members, “An equal common ownership of capital equipment in cooperatives may thus lead to the participation of workers in the profits made, but not necessarily to a fundamental transformation of the power structure within the enterprise” (1991: 156). Rothschild and Whitt affirm that collective ownership alone does not guarantee democratic processes and worker allegiance and satisfaction. They contend that:

In certain circumstances, ownership by itself does appear to raise workers’ expectations that they will have more say, or will be treated with greater respect, but in instances where it does not deliver on this promise, it disappoints. Its fuller potential is realized only when ownership is coupled with added opportunities for employee involvement in decision-making and control” (1986: 150).

Bayat goes on to say that equal ownership cannot be achieved unless external and internal obstacles are overcome, including authoritarianism and manipulation by leaders and the unequal division of labor (1991: 172). In line with Bayat, Carter emphasizes the importance of identifying the “informal processes of control,” including leadership, information flow, and expertise organization that affect power distribution among groups or individuals within a given cooperative and determine who has control over the organization of work (1990: 325).

**Leadership**

While strong leadership can carry a group, leadership and its implied powers can also lead to group disintegration. Rose, Sherman, and Young are careful to point out that leadership need not be driven by want of power or material incentives; motivation may lie in achieving nonmaterial ends such as community welfare, satisfying “purposive and solidary-status gains” and achieving economic goals (1981: 24).

Even though power may not be actively pursued, it is a byproduct of the leadership position. Rothschild and Whitt contend that the very existence of a leader means that there are inherent inequalities in influence among group members. If the leader exploits his or her position to sway members, the “consensual” decision-making process is threatened (1986: 88). However, the power inherent in leadership need not hamper group functioning. While the leader can manipulate and abuse power to the detriment of the group, they can also provide appropriate guidance. Shah notes that cooperative management is a difficult and sacrificial role that requires
greater skills than ordinary business management, since the goals of the members and the market have to be delicately balanced, and the manager also has to defer to the wishes of the membership; he cannot act quickly and decisively on his own initiative, but must carry the members with him. He must also share the profits resulting from his skill with them rather than keeping them for himself. *(1996: 135)*

Leaders have control of operations and resources and can further their private ends, often by way of corruption, with little risk of punishment *(Rose, Sherman, Young 1981: 23)*. Graciela noted that because she handles the accounts, she is open to accusations. However, no members mentioned that they have suspected any foul play.

“Experience suggests that many leaders will prefer the short-run advantages of manipulation of cooperative resources for personal ends to the attempt to succeed in managing cooperative affairs according to objective economic and technical criteria. There is...no guarantee that efforts to manage efficiently will be crowned with success *(Rose, Sherman, Young 1981: 24)*.

Indeed, the tortillería once suffered as a result of corrupt leaders who, in 1981, attempted to steal money from the collective fund. The women were in positions as president and treasurer at the time, and were mandated to leave the group by the Procuraduria Agraria (government office that deals with agricultural issues) and lost their liquidación (year-end dividend). Only five years ago, two other women attempted to steal money. When Graciela did the accounting she discovered the missing money and accused the women during a monthly meeting. The group agreed not to file a formal complaint because these two women also accused Graciela of slander.

For some, these experiences have had a lasting effect, and for others, time has largely erased these events. Graciela noted that while “We lost money, they (the thieves) lost more,” referring to their loss of reputation and respect in the community. Apart from these incidents, Graciela’s consistent, underlying leadership has not presented issues of distrust or abuse of control. Further, while specialization of knowledge can point to power imbalances, in the case of the tortillería, the few members with designated tasks different from the rest of the group did not present great threats to the members’ feelings about equality.

**Conclusions**

The tortillería has proven to be a successful endeavor, by its ability to meet certain conditions which foster internal democracy, and by what has been identified by members as its ability to serve significant personal, social, and economic roles. Despite the active membership, the tortillería seems to satisfy the leader-induced cooperation typology put forth by Shah. This categorization points to cooperatives whose success is cultivated and sustained by charismatic leaders *(1996: 20)*. In response to the question of how the women have remain united for so long, a member replied that the women have had the courage to overcome obstacles and went on to say, “Thanks to Graciela who has oriented us. If it weren’t for her we wouldn’t exist. We aren’t knowledgeable.” While Graciela has been an obvious leader, she has not used her power to dominate decision-making and participatory processes, helping to maintain organizational democracy.

One of the long-standing and primary figures in the history of the cooperative, who is Graciela’s sister, family member of all of the individuals that she mentions below, and a past committee member, outlined three figures who have been instrumental in the history of the cooperative. According to Graciela’s sister, each of these people has made their mark at significant points in the development process; each allowed the group to evolve and sustain itself. Elena is
responsible for the initial steps toward group formation. In addition to jumpstarting the idea, she was able to encourage and mobilize women in the town to join. The next significant figure was Don Martinez, who came to be comisario ejidal during a crucial point in group formation and helped the women to overcome resistance. While Elena and Don Martinez were key players in the beginning, Graciela has carried the group and continues to consider the welfare of the group and recommend possible improvements to group functioning.

While it is apparent that each of these individuals facilitated the continuation of the group, the larger membership, consisting of a cohesive, committed base, has largely contributed to the cooperative’s effective functioning. A member noted that, “The group has remained together for so long because they treat each other well. There is a greater cooperative spirit among the women (in our community) than among the men.” Their overall comments reveal that shared values have been a driving force in their continued existence.

The women recognize that group strife can lead to disintegration: “We have to be compañeras and not talk bad about one another.” And, they distinguish between work behavior and that which happens outside. The women get along well when they are together, though “they bicker behind each other’s backs.” Members noted that there is bickering and small problems, but they are always resolved quickly, with the women able to forget about them and move on. Real problems are attributed to technology and the products, rather than the relationships among the women. Indeed, the women have been able to keep internal divisions to a minimum by maintaining open communication, the rotation of staff between different tasks, equal benefits, small work teams, and a consultative management style.

The history of the tortillería is framed as one of challenge, struggle in overcoming obstacles, perseverance, and overall triumph. One member referred to the “disappointments and joys” as being part of the process. The story of the tortillería as conveyed by members emphasizes the sense of group solidarity forged over time, the improvements made in working style, the sense of ownership gained by acquiring new material additions, as well as their role established as contributors to the community. The women have made their mark on the community level and have proven both socially and economically buoyant. I hope that I have offered an analysis of the success of the tortillería on its own terms, in addition to looking at its internal structure in the context organizational theory.

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Shah, Tushaar.

Shah, Tushaar.

United States Department of Agriculture, Foreign Agricultural Service
Appendix A

Interview of a group of the Unidad Agrícola Industrial para La Mujer Campesina:
The Tortillería in Los Angeles, Michoacán, México

1. ¿Cuántos años tiene? ¿Es casada? ¿Tiene hijos?
   How old are you? Are you married? Do you have children?

2. ¿Tiene otro trabajo afuera de la casa?
   Do you have another job outside of the house?

3. ¿Usted es una asocia original de la tortillería? Si no, cómo se hizo miembro?
   Are you an original member of the tortillería? If not, how did you become a member?

4. ¿Ha afrontado resistencia por parte de su esposo cuando tomó la decisión para entrar en el grupo?
   Did you encounter resistance from your husband when you made the decision to join the group?

5. ¿Por qué le interesaba ser un miembro del grupo?
   Why were you interested in becoming a member of the group?

6. Solo si la persona tiene una posición específica: ¿Qué son las responsabilidades de su posición?
   If the person has a specific position: What are the responsibilities of your position?

7. ¿Cómo son las relaciones entre las mujeres que pertenecen al grupo? ¿Cómo han cambiado estas relaciones desde que se formó el grupo?
   How are the relations between the women who participate in the group? How have these relations changed since the group formed?

8. ¿Qué tipo de problemas cotidianos hay en la función de la tortillería?
   What types of daily problems are there with the functioning of the tortillería?

9. ¿Se comparte las responsabilidades igualmente entre las mujeres durante el día de trabajo?
   Do you divide the responsibilities equally between the women during the work day?

10. ¿Cómo se toman decisiones dentro del grupo? ¿Todos participan igualmente en la toma de decisiones?
    How does the group make decisions? Does everyone participate equally in making decisions?

11. ¿Qué es el proceso para resolver problemas en el grupo?
    What is the process to resolve problems with the group?

12. ¿Cuáles cambios se podría hacer para que funcione mejor el grupo?
    What changes took place in order for the group to function better?

13. ¿Cuáles fueron algunas de las dificultades que tuvieron que superar durante la historia de la tortillería?
    What were some of the difficulties that you had to overcome within the group throughout the history of the tortillería?

14. ¿Cuáles obstáculos externos han afrontado las mujeres del grupo?
    What external obstacles have the women in the group confronted?

15. ¿Cuáles son los pensamientos de la gente de la comunidad sobre la tortillería? Hay algunas actitudes negativas hacia la tortillería?
    What does the community think about the tortillería? Are there negative attitudes about the tortillería?

16. ¿Cómo sirve a la comunidad la tortillería? Considera usted que la tortillería sirve como una fuerza importante en la comunidad?
    How does the tortillería serve the community? Do you consider it an important force in the community?
17. ¿Cómo ha cambiado el papel de la mujer aquí en esta comunidad siendo dueñas y trabajadores de la tortillería?
   *How has the role of the women here in the community changed being owners and workers at the tortillería?*

18. ¿Cómo ha cambiado su propia vida siendo miembro del grupo? (Diría que su vida es mejor, la misma…?)
   *How has your own life changed as a member of the group? (Is your life better, the same…?)*

19. ¿Cómo ha logrado el grupo permanecer unido tanto tiempo?
   *How has the group managed to stay united for so long?*

20. ¿Hay alguna ventaja de ser una Unidad Agrícola Industrial para La Mujer Campesina?
    *Is there an advantage to being part of Unidad Agrícola Industrial para La Mujer Campesina?*

21. ¿Cómo Unidad Agrícola, tiene el grupo la libertad para actuar independientemente?
    *As a part of Unidad Agrícola, does the group have the freedom to act independently?*

22. ¿Qué es una cooperativa en su opinión?
    *In your opinion, what is a cooperative?*

23. ¿Cuáles ventajas hay en trabajar como cooperativa? Hay algunas desventajas?
    *What advantages are there to working as a cooperative? Are there disadvantages?*

24. ¿Qué son las diferencias entre las tortillerías en Los Reyes y su tortillería?
    *What are the differences between the tortillerías in Los Reyes and your tortillería?*